

The Occupy Movement and debt

An interview with David Graeber

DAVID GRAEBER & GUSTAAF HOUTMAN

David Graeber is Reader in Social Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author of numerous books, most recently, *Debt: The first five thousand years*, and has been involved in numerous activist projects.



Fig. 1. David Graeber

David Graeber seems to have entered right into the maelstrom of community responses to the financial crisis and to have touched on a topic that is today on everyone's mind, namely debt.

Gustaaf Houtman: *Over the last year, your work, especially *Debt: The first 5000 years*, has been cited by major newspapers internationally, including the specialist financial press. Why do you think your work has had the impact it has, and how did this come about?*

David Graeber: It's actually been curiously uneven. The coverage was wall-to-wall in Germany and I got some good press attention in the UK, but surprisingly little in the US. To this day almost no major newspapers or magazines have reviewed it. National Public Radio did two or three interviews with me, but never aired them. So I had to rely largely on the web and local radio. But then, public discourse is far more policed in the US than almost anywhere.

When I wrote the book, I was quite consciously trying to write the sort of thing that only an anthropologist can really do – draw on the full range of human experience to make broad points about the human situation that are relevant to pressing contemporary issues – but that anthropologists, for some reason, have decided we should never do any more. The imperative of the discipline nowadays always seems to be: think small! I don't know if the work has much endeared me to the discipline, but I guess it turns out that's what a lot of non-anthropologists really want from us.

GH: *You have argued for debt cancellation. With debts in practice ultimately moving into the hands of tax payers, how can debt cancellation have any realistic promise of resolving the financial crisis we are in today without harming those who may not have been the cause of it?*

DG: For me, the idea that debt cancellation has to mean a taxpayer bailout is rooted in just the sort of false view of money that my book aims to expose. Money isn't petroleum. It's not like there's only so much of it, so if you give it to me you have to take it from someone else. A debt can be cancelled just by making it unenforceable. Obviously we wouldn't want to do this in a way that will leave pensioners high and dry, but honestly, they are exactly the people who are most likely to suffer from the current mainstream approaches being floated: austerity plans, or inflation.

GH: *How do you see the financial crisis evolving from here and what measures need governments and citizens take to resolve this crisis?*

DG: Well anyone who looks at the situation honestly knows that some form of debt cancellation will have to take place. This is clearly the case in Europe, and I found when I talked to members of the German political class for instance, they were perfectly willing to admit it. In the US, the Federal Reserve actually released a white paper calling for mortgage cancellation. It's going to happen because they've tried everything else, and even if most of the people running the system are working with maybe a three-year horizon, it's getting to the point that a 2008-style collapse is looming even within that. The question is how it'll be dressed-up. Are they going to admit they're doing it? I argue in the book that it's very important that the jubilee be as broad, and as honest, as possible, because it's high time we start a public discussion of what money is, and stop using the antiquated terms we've been employing to describe it. We are 40 years or so into an age of virtual money, where it's impossible to claim money 'is' a com-

modity, a concrete thing; it's a social relation, an IOU, a series of promises we make each other. If democracy is to mean anything, it can only mean that everyone – not just 1% of the population – has a say in deciding what sort of promises we make and, when circumstances change, which are kept and which are renegotiated.

GH: *You have often been cited in relation to the Occupy movement, in the early formation of which, you personally played a part. In what ways are you still engaged?*

DG: I've been spending the summer working with the Strike Debt group, which is part of Occupy in New York. It wasn't entirely my idea – while I was away in Europe in May, actually, there were a series of debtors' assemblies that were extremely successful, and a lot of people decided we should concentrate on creating a campaign of debt resistance for the fall. So I kind of got drafted into that.

GH: *The Occupy movement has often been linked to initiatives elsewhere in the world, such as the Indignants in Spain and the Arab Spring. How do you see these movements relate to one another, on the one hand, and as distinct, on the other?*

DG: Oh we had people from Greece, Spain, even Egypt helping us last summer when we were first planning for the occupation of Zuccotti Park (New York). We've always worked together and considered ourselves part of the same broader movement: which is largely a rebellion against undemocratic regimes answerable only to global power structures (especially financial ones) and in the name of popular, direct democracy. Obviously the nature of the regimes and the local situation varies enormously. I find it interesting that the US movement is the most radical: its core is overtly anti-capitalist, even anarchist. And it's the first to forefront a specifically class analysis with the idea of the 1%. But then, perhaps that's inevitable. After all, every movement has to ask, who are we fighting against? In Egypt, or even Greece, you can see yourself as simply resisting American imperialism. But in the US, we don't really have that option! We're more or less obliged to frame it in terms of class power.

GH: *Noam Chomsky describes the Occupy movement as the most significant protest movement since the 1970s. One feature is an overt emphasis on consensus decision-making without leaders. However, many observers express concern over this movement's lack of specificity and leadership as a weakness. Do you think this fair?*

DG: It depends on what you think Occupy should be trying to do. If your aim is to achieve immediate legislative victories, for instance, then yes, we'd be better off with a more vertical structure and concrete legislative demands. But that would mean destroying the two most powerful elements in the movement: first, the way that we managed to give voice to the widespread feeling in America that the system is so hopelessly corrupt it's basically no longer legitimate, that the political class has been bought and sold and cannot even address the problems ordinary people face; and second, the attempt to try to imagine, and create, institutions that could exist in a genuinely free and democratic society. I think it's critical we have people doing that. After all, there's already a thousand groups touting proposals for legislative reforms. Until we came along, they were getting nowhere. We didn't make them relevant by adopting their reforms or pushing our own set of reforms. We did it by posing an even more radical alternative.

GH: *How did this movement evolve and how did it change its objectives?*

DG: Well, the camps were a wonderful opportunity to reach out to people who'd never had the opportunity to experience directly democratic decision-making, alternative economics or the very idea of organization through mutual aid. It wasn't going to last forever. We knew that the government was going to react with extreme violence – despite the fact that we were, quite possibly, the most non-violent movement of its size in American history. What we didn't expect was the almost complete betrayal of our liberal allies, who looked the other way when city after city – clearly in some kind of national coordinated effort – decided to effectively repeal the First Amendment when it came to freedom of assembly. Almost instantly, they tried to come up with some reason, any reason, to say we'd brought it on ourselves: 'you know, six weeks ago, some guy who might have been part of a Black Bloc associated with Occupy broke a window in Oakland...' – that sort of thing, and turned it all into a debate between supposed Gandhians and supposed 'pro-violence' elements.

To me it was quite shocking, especially because the version of Gandhi they were proposing had nothing to do with Gandhi's actual campaigns, where there were plenty of incidents of people damaging property after all, and often doing much worse; it was just a kind of impossible ideal, that has never been achievable in any large-scale social movement anywhere, and never could be, created as an excuse to justify police breaking non-violent protestors' heads. (But if you pointed that out, they called you 'pro-violence'.) By now, it's just considered normal that if a number of people assemble for a perfectly peaceful, even legal, OWS (Occupy Wall Street) event, one or two will end up in the hospital from police attacks. It's not even newsworthy. It never gets reported. Needless to say this has limited the number and sort of people who are willing to attend – which is of course the purpose. So we've been reformulating our tactics. There's still lots of projects going on: we have nine different occupied farms, for instance, in the New York area, and all sorts of home defence projects, rent strikes, local assemblies, the various debt campaigns, corporate campaigns... really there's no end to it. We're also building ongoing ties with unions and community and immigrant rights groups. But when the liberals dropped us, the press coverage mysteriously disappeared as well.

GH: *Chomsky draws attention to the Occupy movement as having 'changed the entire framework of discussion of many issues' (it influenced New York City Council in passing a resolution against corporate personhood, and their call for Congress to follow suit). What other achievements have been attained so far?*

DG: Well you have to remember that when we appeared on the scene last summer, the big argument in politics was over the need to slash the budget, with President Obama actually challenging the Republicans to let him slash Medicare and social security. That all ended almost instantly. So there's been a conceptual reset. And tens of thousands of people have some experience with an entirely new way of doing politics. Remember, social movements take years. We need to create a democratic culture where none has really existed before. This is going to take an enormous amount of work. But we've laid the groundwork in a remarkably short period of time.

GH: *Chomsky has also spoken of the movement's potential role in invigorating 'industrial democracy', essentially by stimulating worker-community owned enterprises. What changes do you believe the Occupy movement is aiming for?*

DG: I do see a revival of interest in applying the principles of horizontality to different aspects of life. Once people have experienced a general assembly, or even a well-facilitated working group meeting, or a collectively managed project like the camp kitchens and libraries, it's very hard to go back to your workplace, for instance, and

not see its internal organization as little short of insane. You only put up with the stupidities that hierarchical leadership structures and impersonal bureaucracies produce because you assume there's no other way to do things. The moment you realize this isn't true, it changes your perspective on everything.

GH: *As an anthropologist, how do you rhyme activism with bona fide research and how far does participant observation take you? To what extent is being a professional anthropologist not the wherewithal we think it is?*

DG: In a way I've always had two careers. I publish purely anthropological work on Madagascar or value theory or the divine kingship of the Shilluk or for that matter, my work on debt. And I publish it largely in peer-reviewed books and journals and even occasionally apply for grants. And then there's my work on anarchism, which I never submit to academic peer-review or try to get grants for. I think it's important that I don't, because when you start thinking about an intellectual problem with the expectation of doing so, it affects how you frame your questions in ways you often don't even realize. When I write about activism I want to ask questions that are interesting to, and useful for, activists, not for funding agencies. So my ethnography of direct action wasn't really participant observation in the usual sense, it was more like observant participation.

Of course there's always overlap in either direction. I do end up asking questions in my political work that are more interesting to scholars than to hardcore activists, and vice versa, but I also like to think that in the very long run, these are not at cross-purposes, because just as scholarship has an interest in creating a genuinely free society, everyone in the world benefits from human understanding in the largest sense.

GH: *What role do you see for anthropologists in this era of crisis? To what extent do you feel they can, or should, participate in what is happening?*

DG: Anthropology has always been a battle-ground between those who embraced the imperialist project – or at least passively acquiesced in furthering its imperatives – and those who wished to resist it and felt that expanding our understanding of other human social, political, or economic possibilities was inherently subversive of that project. I don't think things have changed much in this respect since the 1870s. But I should clarify something here. Ever since I wrote *Fragments*, a lot of people seem to have this weird idea that I feel that any anthropologist or scholar who isn't somehow trying to further the goal of revolution every day has something to answer for. I've never known why people think this about me, since I've never said anything of the kind, and I certainly don't think it. Actually, I like the idea of scholarship for its own sake. I like to call it 'the utopian moment in scholarship'. Why shouldn't there be people studying medieval Provencal musical instruments, just because they find it interesting? I'd like to see a society where everyone has the opportunity to do that.

But I also think anthropology has something unique to give to those trying to imagine other human possibilities and if nothing else, we shouldn't come up with reasons why we shouldn't make this knowledge available to those who actively wish to make use of it. I often suspect that one of the perverse legacies of the 'reflective moment' of the '80s was to convince us that since our knowledge is simply a product of colonial power, there's something fundamentally wrong with it, and that it's therefore pernicious somehow to disseminate it beyond the circle of professional anthropologists and their students – so it becomes an excuse to keep it all as a kind of private property; our guilty secret, but *our* secret, off-limits to everyone else. Certainly any broad generalizations on its basis would be inherently illegitimate. But who else is in a position to even begin to make such generalizations? This is exactly the sort of thinking I was trying to defy in *Debt*. ●

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